



# ACSC Quick-Look

*Catalyst for Air & Space Power Research Dialogue*



## *The Collapse of Apartheid in South Africa*

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**Background.** South Africa's system of racial division, apartheid ("separateness" in Afrikaans) was instituted in the late 1940s by the White minority government. It was designed to preserve the economic, political and social advantages for South Africans of European heritage. Indigenous Blacks were denied the right to vote or to attain equal treatment in commonly recognized social goods like education, medicine and recreational facilities. While apartheid is mostly infamous for its oppression of the Black majority, Asians and Coloureds (those of mixed ancestry) were also persecuted.

In the 1960s, the Black majority began to protest more forcefully against their inequality through acts of civil disobedience, rioting, and small scale terrorism. In response, the government ordered harsher methods to quell the unrest, such as widespread torture, summary executions and "disappearances." With the success of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe's independence from Britain and the overthrow of its White minority government in 1980, Blacks in South Africa gained more hope for their own struggle against apartheid. More oppression followed and the international community began to take greater notice of conditions in South Africa. After a decade of international economic sanctions, economic and cultural boycotts, and business divestments aimed at South Africa, the two sides began negotiations to end both apartheid and White minority rule.

**The Post Conflict Process.** To end deep-seated civil conflict in South Africa, scholars agree that two processes that were undertaken nearly simultaneously proved significant.

- Agreement on the treatment of the ruling elite in the post-conflict society. The parties who negotiated the end of apartheid and White minority rule, the African National Congress (ANC) and the National Party, met repeatedly to reach an agreement on the status of the White minority in South Africa and the ruling White regime. The ANC agreed that there would not be any political, economic or social reprisals against these groups. While many Blacks wanted the White minority to be "pushed into the sea" and go back to Europe or elsewhere, the ANC guaranteed that there would be no "ethnic cleansing" in South Africa. Also, a very careful process on bringing perpetrators of political violence to justice was worked out with churches (see below).
- Constitutional protections for minority populations. As part of the negotiations on the post-conflict status of the White population, the ANC renewed their historical commitment to a multiracial South Africa with human rights guaranteed to all individuals in the country without regard to race, gender, ethnicity, or creed. These rights were enshrined in a new constitution which is commonly regarded as the most comprehensive exposition of human rights on the African continent.

**Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRC).** These Commissions were organized by both sides with help from the two main Christian denominations in South Africa—the Dutch Reformed Church and the Anglican Church. Headed by the internationally renowned Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, these commissions walked a fine line between justice and order. Those charged with political violence could apply for a grant of amnesty if they appeared before the commission and confessed their crimes under the apartheid regime. If they confessed to all their crimes in a public forum, they qualified for amnesty. However, if they were called before the commission and failed to acknowledge their roles in political violence, they were prosecuted.

**Contemporary South Africa.** Many Whites have left the country due to economic stagnation and a surge in the level of street crime since the fall of apartheid. South Africans continue to cite crime and poverty as the biggest challenges to sustaining the multiracial democracy so carefully crafted in the 1990s. Resentment at the slow pace of development in the Black townships continues and resentment in predominantly White cities is also quite high. However, political

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violence as known in the 1980s is no longer a factor. TRCs still remain quite controversial for all involved. Many family members of victims of political violence believe amnesty is not justice. Many Whites feel the TRCs do not fairly aim their sights on Black perpetrators of violence and resist the TRCs mandate.

### **Considerations for Current Operations.**

- The role of religion: South Africa is largely a Protestant country. Both Blacks and Whites belong to either the Reformed tradition or Anglican Church. This common sense of religious belonging enabled Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRC) to proceed under an aura of legitimacy. Reconciliation and forgiveness play large roles in the Christian faith and remain levers used by the parties to build a path toward a transition to a multiracial and democratic South Africa.
- The role of spoilers: There were extremists in both communities who sought to scuttle the agreements worked out by the more moderate representatives of the sides. Many were given roles in the post-conflict government or were prosecuted under the terms of the TRC. In the immediate days after the release of Nelson Mandela, White extremists attempted a coordinated campaign of violence against the White government. Such a campaign failed owing to the extremists' small numbers and the willingness of the White community to reject political violence as a means to settle disputes.
- The role of outside powers and international organizations: Outside powers and international organizations played a very small part in the post-conflict reconciliation. South Africans themselves developed indigenous solutions based on their own history and culture. Very little outside presence was involved in the hammering out of guarantees.
- The democratic tradition: Although apartheid South Africa was a very limited democracy, institutions such as parliaments and courts were expansive enough to include the ANC's vision of multiracial democracy after apartheid and White minority rule were dismantled. In short, South Africa did not have to create a democratic template upon which to build a functioning post-conflict democracy.
- The level of violence: The level of violence in apartheid South Africa did not reach the level of what is generally considered low intensity conflict. The Black population was systematically repressed since the seventeenth century. South Africa is geographically isolated and the Black community did not have a superpower sponsor or benefactor that could have supplied it with arms or funding. The White minority government used violence more systematically under the old regime and thus had to work to relinquish the tools and institutions that had allowed it to sustain its grip on power.